



Washington State Department of Agriculture News Release

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WASHINGTON STATE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

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Poultry at county, state fairs to be screened for bird flu

OLYMPIA – State animal health personnel will be touring fair poultry barns in August and September to test chickens and other birds for avian influenza. The Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) is expanding its surveillance effort to protect the health of the state's commercial and backyard flocks, as well as reassure fair visitors.

Just as humans suffer from seasonal influenza, bird flu is not uncommon and occurs naturally. Most infected birds do not suffer severe symptoms from common varieties of the virus and human health is not impacted. No form of highly pathogenic avian influenza, which is deadly to the birds that contract it, has ever been found in Washington.

Veterinarians and public health experts in Washington remain on the lookout for the Asian H5N1 bird flu virus, even though that virus has never been found in North America. At least 134 people living and working in close quarters with H5N1-infected poultry have died of the virus in Asia and the Middle East, according to the World Health Organization.

"Because birds from so many different flocks come together at our fairs, these events are great disease surveillance opportunities," said Dr. Leonard Eldridge, Washington state veterinarian. "While the probability that we will find the H5N1 virus at a fair is extremely low, we will also make this an opportunity to share information with bird owners about how to keep their flocks free of a variety of animal diseases. We can also spend some time educating the general public about bird flu, even those who interact with live chickens only at these kinds of special events."

WSDA's avian health program is also conducting bird flu testing and outreach education at poultry auctions, swap meets and other venues where domestic birds from several flocks co-mingle. Backyard bird enthusiasts are encouraged to report signs of unusual illness among birds, such as sneezing, coughing, nasal discharge, diarrhea, listlessness and sudden death, to the state veterinarian's office or their local veterinarian.

Larger commercial poultry and egg operations, which isolate their flocks and maintain tight security, continue to conduct bird flu testing before food products go to market.

If highly pathogenic bird flu is discovered in poultry in Washington, WSDA has developed a containment plan to protect public health, destroy the infected flock, prevent the spread of the disease and limit the economic damage to the poultry industry. No diseased birds will be allowed to enter the food supply. Also, normal food handling and cooking practices kill flu viruses, salmonella bacteria and other food-borne pathogens.

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In addition to the WSDA testing program, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the federal and state departments of Fish and Wildlife are conducting extensive bird flu surveillance programs of domestic poultry, wild waterfowl and shorebirds in Washington.

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